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GLC 63
CAMERON

SPEECHES

UNITING OURSELVES - BRIDGING OUR

"Limiting Ourselves - Bridging Our Differences"
BMC June 1987 about Testimony for

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CAMERON

SPEECHES

UNITING OURSELVES - BRIDGING OUR

Limiting Ourselves - Bridging Our Differences
BMC June 1987 about Testimony of Color

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UNITING OURSELVES

~~UNITING OURSELVES~~ - BRIDGING OUR DIFFERENCES BARBARA M. CAMERON 13 JUNE 1987

WHEN I WAS 17, I ATTEMPTED SUICIDE. IT WAS ON MAY 19, 1971. ALL AFTERNOON, I PLAYED ONE SONG BY RINGO STARR OVER AND OVER AND OVER. THE REFRAIN AND TITLE OF THE SONG "IT DON'T COME EASY" BECAME MY MANTRA FOR THAT DAY AND INTO THE EVENING. I THINK IT SHOULD BE ADDED TO THE TITLE OF THIS PANEL. ~~UNITING OURSELVES~~ ~~BRIDGING OUR DIFFERENCES~~ - BRIDGING OUR DIFFERENCES - IT DON'T COME EASY.

IT WAS WITH GREAT DIFFICULTY THAT I PREPARED MY PRESENTATION; IT DEFINITELY DID NOT COME EASY. WHAT COULD I SAY AND MAYBE MORE IMPORTANTLY, HOW DOES ONE SAY IT? HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE OUR LIVES, WHO WE ARE, OUR PAIN, OUR HAPPINESS, OUR POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES WHICH HAVE SURELY RECEIVED POTSHOTS FROM EVERYONE. AND WHY WOULD WE WANT TO?

I SAID RECENTLY AT ANOTHER PANEL THAT IT TAKES COURAGE TO LIVE MY LIFE AND THAT'S NOT AN EXAGGERATION. BUT IN REALITY IT DOES TAKE MORE THAN JUST COURAGE TO LIVE AS A NATIVE AMERICAN LESBIAN. IT INCLUDES HAVING MY IMMEDIATE FAMILY STILL ALIVE IN SOUTH DAKOTA EXCEPT FOR MY GRANDFATHER AND SOME GREAT UNCLES, MY IMMEDIATE FAMILY IN SAN FRANCISCO WHICH INCLUDES MY LOVER-PARTNER, LINDA OUR SON RHYS, OUR FOUR CATS AND ONE DOG, MY 27 INCH TELEVISION, MY VCR, MY COMPACT DISC PLAYER, AND MY EXCEPTIONAL EXTENDED FAMILY OF INTIMATE FRIENDS AND POLITICAL COLLEAGUES. IN A SENSE MY HOME IS IN HERE IN SAN FRANCISCO. MY HOME IS MY BASE, MY SUPPORT NETWORK, THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE ME FEEL LOVED.

From subtle to blatant
From blatant to subtle
Sledgehammer

YET I HAVE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT ALTHOUGH A STRONG PART OF MY IDENTITY IS AS A LESBIAN OF COLOR, IT IS THE WEAKEST PART OF MY HOME. THE THREE OF US HAVE WORKED FOR MANY YEARS NOW IN A VARIETY OF ORGANIZATIONS, GROUPS, COMMUNITIES AND COLLECTIVES. WE'VE BEEN OUT AS LESBIANS OF COLOR IN ALL THE POLITICAL WORK THAT WE DO. WE HAVE DONE THE COMING OUT: IT'S THE COMING HOME THAT WE ARE WORKING TOWARD, A HOME TO COME TO.

ABOUT A YEAR OR SO AFTER MOVING TO SAN FRANCISCO IN 1973, ONE OF MY ROOMMATES TOLD ME THAT THERE WAS THIS WOMAN I JUST HAD TO MEET. SHE WAS THIRD WORLD, DYNAMIC, WONDERFUL AND A LESBIAN MOTHER. (I THOUGHT TO MYSELF WHAT'S A LESBIAN MOTHER?) AT THAT TIME, IT WAS LESBIAN VOGUE TO CHANGE YOUR FIRST OR LAST NAME INTO SOMETHING LIKE SALAD, SAGE, THYME ETC. SO I WAS TRYING TO IMAGINE WHAT THIS DYNAMIC THIRD WORLD LESBIAN'S NAME WAS GOING TO BE. (SALSA, FRYBREAD, CORN?) FINALLY ONE EVENING IT WAS TIME TO MEET THIS WOMAN. SO I SAT IN THE ROOM WHICH LOOKED OUT TO THE PANHANDLE BECAUSE I KNEW MY ROOMMATE AND SHE WOULD BE COMING THROUGH THE PANHANDLE AND THERE WALKED THIS WOMAN WEARING A TRENCH COAT,

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WALKING WITH ABSOLUTE PURPOSE, ALMOST LIKE SHE WAS SEEING A VISION IN THE DISTANCE OR IN A STATE OF GRACE. PAT NORMAN STILL HAS THAT SAME WALK AND SAME LOOK.

MY FIRST MEMORY OF CARMEN WAS AT A THIRD WORLD GAY CAUCUS MEETING AT 32 PAGE ST.

^{Years 1970} IN 1971, 1970, 32 PAGE ST. WAS A LESBIAN/GAY COMMUNITY CENTER. AT THIS PARTICULAR MEETING THERE WERE SEVEN OR EIGHT OF US, AND IT WAS CARMEN'S FIRST MEETING. I REMEMBER LOOKING AT HER AND BEING STRUCK BY HER EYEBROWS. THEY HAVE A HIGH ARCH AND SHE SEEMED A LITTLE SPACED OUT OR I SHOULD SAY PREOCCUPIED. AND HER EYEBROWS SEEMED TO EMPHASIZE HER MOOD. SHE HAD A LOT TO SAY, THEN SHE LEFT, I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND MUCH OF WHAT SHE SAID BUT I KNEW IT WAS VERY INTELLIGENT AND I MOST DEFINITELY AGREED WITH HER. I WONDERED HOW I COULD BECOME FRIENDS WITH HER.

THE THREE OF US HAVE BEEN FAMILY TO ONE ANOTHER AND HAVE BEEN THROUGH A LOT SINCE THOSE EARLIER YEARS. WE'RE AT TIMES A POLITICAL MENAGE A TROIS. WE'VE BEEN DOING IT FOR YEARS. BUT IF THE TRUTH BE TOLD, FEW LESBIANS OF COLOR ARE DOING IT. I ~~could~~ GO TO A PROGRESSIVE FUNCTION AND SEE MAYBE ONE OR TWO OTHER LESBIANS OF COLOR USUALLY CARMEN OR PAT. I COULD GO TO A LESBIAN/GAY EVENT AND SEE MAYBE ONE OR TWO OTHER LESBIANS OF COLOR USUALLY CARMEN OR PAT. I COULD GO TO AMELIAS ON A THURSDAY NIGHT AND SEE MANY LESBIANS OF COLOR.

IT'S NOT THAT I HAVE A SIMPLISTIC VIEW OF THE PARTICIPATION OF LESBIANS OF COLOR IN THIS WORLD OR THAT IT'S ONLY BARBARA CAMERON, PAT NORMAN, CARMEN VAZQUEZ WHO ARE POLITICALLY ACTIVE. IN FACT THERE ARE LESBIANS OF COLOR WHO ARE PROMINENT IN THE ARTISTIC SECTOR OF THE LESBIAN/GAY COMMUNITY, IN LITERATURE MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE. PAT PARKER, CHRYSTOS, MARY WATKINS, CHERRIE MORAGA, LINDA TILLERY, GLORIA ANZALDUA, PAULA GUNN ALLEN, ETC. AND THERE ARE ALSO LESBIANS OF COLOR WHO ARE CLOSETED WHILE THEY DO THEIR POLITICAL WORK. THERE ARE ALSO LESBIANS OF COLOR WHO EXERT A STRONG INFLUENCE IN THE SOCIAL SERVICE FIELDS. BUT LESBIANS OF COLOR AS A GROUP ARE NOT A STRONG VOICE. OUR SEGREGATION IS NOT AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR EMPOWERING OUR LIVES. WE ARE ISOLATED AND DISCONNECTED FROM ONE ANOTHER. WE ARE IN SOME SENSE HOMELESS.

WE CAN UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE NEED FOR INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM BY THE RULING CLASSES AND EVEN THE NEED AMONGST THOSE OF US WHO ARE THE TARGETS OF THIS RACISM AND CROSS RACIAL HOSTILITY. BUT ARMED WITH THIS KNOWLEDGE OF WHY RACISM EXISTS DOES NOT ALLEVIATE THE PAIN, THE HEARTACHE THAT RACISM CREATES, THE DIVISION, THE MISTRUST, THE UGLY IMAGES WE CARRY AROUND OF EACH OTHER AND SOMETIMES MANIFEST.

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I CAN POINT TO THIS LESBIAN OF COLOR AND SAY SHE'S CAUSED ME PAIN BECAUSE SHE WILL NOT ACKNOWLEDGE ME BECAUSE OF MY LIGHT SKIN. I CAN POINT TO THIS LESBIAN OF COLOR AND SAY SHE'S CAUSED ME PAIN BECAUSE SHE WILL NOT ACKNOWLEDGE ME BECAUSE MY LOVER IS A WHITE WOMAN AND WE HAVE A WHITE SON. I CAN POINT TO THIS LESBIAN OF COLOR AND SAY SHE'S CAUSED ME PAIN BECAUSE SHE DOESN'T RESPECT THAT I WORK WITH WHITE LESBIANS AND WHITE GAY MEN. I CAN POINT TO THIS LESBIAN OF COLOR AND SAY SHE'S CAUSED ME PAIN BECAUSE SHE THINKS I DON'T KNOW HOW TO HANG OUT WITH OTHER LESBIANS OF COLOR, I DON'T TALK RIGHT. I CAN POINT TO THIS LESBIAN OF COLOR AND SAY SHE'S CAUSED ME PAIN BECAUSE SHE DOESN'T KNOW SHIT ABOUT NATIVE AMERICANS AND SHE DOESN'T CARE.

IDENTIFYING THE ISSUES AND CONCERNS THAT KEEP US APART IS ONLY ONE PART OF THIS PROCESS OF BRIDGING THE DIFFERENCES. AND THESE ISSUES GET REINFORCED, RE-IDENTIFIED AS MORE LESBIANS OF COLOR COME OUT AND AS THEY GO THROUGH RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER LESBIANS OF COLOR.

WHEN I MOVED TO SAN FRANCISCO IN 1973, MY MOST IMMEDIATE NEED WAS TO FIND OTHER NATIVE AMERICAN LESBIANS AND GAY MEN. IN ORDER TO FIND THEM, I CO-FOUNDED A GROUP FOR LESBIAN/GAY NATIVE AMERICANS. BUT MUCH TO MY SURPRISE, I FOUND LITTLE POLITICAL UNITY WITH THE MAJORITY OF THE GROUP. INSTEAD THE GROUP TENDED TOWARD SOCIAL ACTIVITIES, PARTIES. IT WAS PROFOUNDLY DISAPPOINTING FOR ME TO FIND OTHER LESBIAN/GAY NATIVE AMERICANS AND THEN DISCOVER THAT THERE WAS NOT SUFFICIENT POLITICAL INTEREST IN RELATING TO THE LARGER LESBIAN/GAY COMMUNITY OR TO THE PROGRESSIVE COMMUNITY. I DID UNDERSTAND WHY THE GROUP WOULD NOT BE INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING WITH OTHER GROUPS BECAUSE OF HOMOPHOBIA IN THE STRAIGHT PROGRESSIVE COMMUNITY AND RACISM IN THE WHITE LESBIAN/GAY COMMUNITY

IT WAS THERE THAT I BEGAN TO STRONGLY CONFRONT THE IDEA THAT BECAUSE I'M NATIVE AMERICAN, I SHOULD ONLY RELATE TO OTHER NATIVE AMERICANS OR TO THOSE WHITE PEOPLE WHO ARE NATIVE AMERICAN GROUPIES. I CHOSE TO STEP OUT OF THOSE BOUNDARIES.

AND IN MAKING THAT DECISION CAME A GREAT DEAL OF PAIN. STEPPING OUT OF OUR BOUNDARIES. WHAT EXACTLY DOES THAT MEAN? IN THE BEGINNING FOR ME THERE WAS GUILT. I FELT LIKE I WAS A TRAITOR, ABANDONING MY PEOPLE. AS I BECAME HIGHLY VISIBLE IN THE LESBIAN/GAY COMMUNITY, I EXPERIENCED A VARIETY OF NEGATIVE RESPONSES FROM LESBIANS AND GAY MEN OF COLOR. ONE NATIVE AMERICAN GAY MAN TOLD ME HE WAS TIRED OF ALWAYS SEEING MY FACE IN THE NEWSPAPER, AND THAT I WAS OBVIOUSLY ON SOME SORT OF POWER TRIP. STEPPING OUT OF OUR BOUNDARIES MEANS WE NO LONGER FIT THE INVISIBLE DEFINITION OF WHAT A REAL LESBIAN OF COLOR IS.

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I BELIEVE THERE IS AN INVISIBLE WEB THAT SURROUNDS US, AND THIS WEB IS A DEFINITION OF WHAT REALLY IS A LESBIAN OF COLOR: SHE ONLY WORKS WITH AND PLAYS WITH PEOPLE OF COLOR AND IT'S OKAY TO BE RACIST ABOUT WHITE PEOPLE. THIS WEB IS A FORMULA FOR THE TRUE LESBIAN OF COLOR: SHE IS ALWAYS A VICTIM IN RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WORLD. I'M CERTAIN WE CAN EXPAND THIS NEGATIVE DEFINITION AND FORMULA FURTHER. IT ACTS AS A GOVERNOR, DETERMINING WHAT'S IN, WHAT'S OUT, WHO'S IN, WHO'S OUT. THE FEMINIST COMMUNITY ALSO HAS A SIMILAR WEB OF WHAT IS APPROPRIATE AND NOT APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR OR CONCERNS FOR THE TRUE FEMINIST. THIS UNSPOKEN DEFINITION MUST BE ELIMINATED. IT RESTRICTS, CONFINES, MORALIZES, AND IT'S UNJUST IN ITS JUDGEMENT.

IT IS ESSENTIAL IN THIS PROCESS OF BRIDGING THE DIFFERENCES THAT THE LESBIAN OF COLOR COMMUNITY LET GO OF JUDGEMENT, TO ALLOW THAT LESBIANS OF COLOR CAN LIVE DIFFERENT WAYS, HAVE MANY INTERESTS AND TO SUPPORT THOSE WHO ARE MULTI-ISSUE ACTIVISTS. CARMEN, PAT AND I CAN TELL MANY STORIES OF HOW THIS JUDGEMENT HAS AFFECTED OUR POLITICAL WORK AND OUR PERSONAL LIVES. FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN I WAS CO-CHAIR OF THE 1985 LESBIAN/GAY FREEDOM DAY COMMITTEE, I WAS CRITICIZED AND THE PARADE COMMITTEE THREATENED WITH AN ORGANIZED BOYCOTT BY GAY AMERICAN INDIANS BECAUSE THERE WAS NOT GOING TO BE A SPEAKER FROM THEIR GROUP. I WAS ALREADY UNDER SIEGE BY OTHER GROUPS TO HAVE THEIR SPEAKERS. I THINK WHAT IRKED ME THE MOST ABOUT THIS BESIDES BEING IN PUBLIC CONFLICT WITH MY OWN PEOPLE, WAS THAT I WAS SUPPOSED TO KNUCKLE DOWN TO THEIR PRESSURES AND THREATS. THEIR INTERPRETATION OF THIS SITUATION TO OTHER LESBIANS AND GAY MEN OF COLOR WAS THAT BARBARA CAMERON SOLD OUT, DIDN'T CARE ABOUT HER PEOPLE AND WAS CLEARLY ALIGNED WITH THE WHITE LESBIANS AND GAY MEN. I BECAME THEIR TARGET EVEN THOUGH I HAD NO DIRECT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COMMITTEE WHICH SELECTED SPEAKERS FOR THE STAGE. IT'S MUCH EASIER TO TRASH YOUR OWN. IN LETTING GO OF JUDGEMENT, HOWEVER, I DO NOT MEAN ELIMINATING THE NEED FOR PRINCIPLED AND ETHICAL BEHAVIOR IN OUR POLITICAL WORK AND IN OUR ARTISTIC ENDEAVORS.

IN STEPPING OUT OF THE BOUNDARIES, WE IN ESSENCE BECOME TARGETS, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY WE BECOME THE BRIDGES. WE CAN TALK TO YOU ABOUT RACISM, HOMOPHOBIA, SEXISM, APARTHEID, NON-INTERVENTION, THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY, MARXISM, LESBIAN/GAY ISSUES, NATIVE AMERICAN, BLACK, PUERTO RICAN SOVEREIGNTY, PARENTING, ANIMAL RIGHTS, RUNNING FOR PUBLIC OFFICE, THE AIDS CRISIS, PEACE.

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THE BOOK THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK, NOT ONLY IS AN IMMENSE WORK OF LITERATURE BUT IT'S TITLE APTLY DESCRIBES, SUMMARIZES THE EXPERIENCES OF CARMEN PAT AND MYSELF. IRNICALLY PAT HAD BACK SURGERY VERY RECENTLY. CARMEN HAS TALKED ABOUT UNITY, HOW ARE WE GOING TO DEFINE IT. CROSS RACIAL COOPERATION PLAYS A SIGNIFICANT PART IN ACHIEVEING THIS UNITY. THERE HAVE BEEN TWO TIMES IN MY POLITICAL LIFE SINCE 1981, IN WHICH I SUBSTANTIALLY FELT POLITICAL UNITY WITH MY SISTERS. THE FIRST WAS AT THE BOOK PARTY FOR THIS BRIDGE. IT WAS AN EXHILARATING EXPERIENCE TO GO THROUGH THE REHEARSALS FOR THE READING, TO WORK IN CONCERT TOWARD A COMMON GOAL, AND TO KNOW THAT WE HAD ACHIEVED SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT WITH THE BOOK; THAT ALL OF US CONTRIBUTED TO IT'S SUCCESS WITHOUT NEGATIVE RACIAL DYNAMICS OR EGO INTERVENTION.

THE SECOND TIME WAS ON THE SOMOS HERMANAS DELEGATION TO NICARAGUA LAST FALL. THERE WERE 20 DIFFERENT WOMEN OF ALL COLORS WHICH POTENTIALLY COULD MEAN DIVISION BUT INSTEAD WE BONDED AND MELDED. THE KEY TO THE SUCCESSFUL DELEGATION WAS THE POLITICAL INTEGRITY OF EACH DELEGATE AND THAT OUR POLITICAL GOALS AND PURPOSES WERE CLEAR.

AND SO I KNOW THAT IT'S POSSIBLE TO ^{have} UNITY, TO BRIDGE THE DIFFERENCES. IT'S NOT ENOUGH JUST TO TALK ABOUT IT, ALTHOUGH THAT IS IMPORTANT. WE NEED TO HAVE MORE PROJECTS THAT WE CAN WORK ON TOGETHER. ORGANIZING THIS CONFERENCE IS A GOOD EXAMPLE OF AN OPPORTUNITY TO WORK IN UNITY, TO BRIDGE THE DIFFERENCES. AND I HOPE THAT HAPPENED. BRIDGING THE DIFFERENCES REALLY DOES TAKE PRACTICE AND IT ALSO REQUIRES FORGIVENESS. *and I don't mean in the christian sense.* I THINK THAT IS THE HARDEST ONE FOR ME TO ACCOMPLISH, TO FORGIVE THOSE LESBIANS AND GAY MEN OF COLOR WHO HAVE HURT ME, WHO REFUSE TO ACKNOWLEDGE OR RESPECT MY WORK. BUT WE NEED TO FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER. HOLDING GRUDGES ONLY HOLDS US BACK. I DONOT MEAN TO IMPLY THAT WE SHOULD BE KISSY FACE WITH ONE ANOTHER BUT THAT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH ONE ANOTHER IS BASED ON SOLID KNOWLEDGE, ON THE COMMITMENT TO CREATING THIS HOME TO COME TO.

I DESCRIBED THE FIRST TIMES I MET CARMEN AND PAT BECAUSE IT'S REALLY A BRIEF ILLUSTRATION OF HOW THINGS WERE 13 YEARS AGO FOR LESBIANS AND GAY MEN OF COLOR. IT WAS OUR FIRST ATTEMPTS AT ORGANIZING OURSELVES AND IT WAS EXCITING. AND IT STILL CAN BE EXCITING, THE POSSIBILITY, THE POTENTIAL FOR UNITY IS THERE. FOR ME IT IS WORTH THE RISKS AND THE PAIN.

SLOWLY WE HAVE BEEN BUILDING THIS FOUNDATION FOR A HOME. I HOPE IT'S LIKE AN ADOBE HOME. IF YOU'VE SEEN ADOBE HOMES, YOU KNOW IT'S DESIGN IS FOR MULII-DWELLINGS, YOU CAN ALWAYS ADD TO AN ADOBE, IT'S CONNECTED IN ALL IT'S DIFFERENT LEVELS AND IT IS IN HARMONY WITH THE ENVIRONMENT. THE MATERIAL OF THE ADOBE SURVIVES YEAR AFER YEAR. AND THAT'S THE KIND OF HOME I WANT WITH OTHER LESBIANS OF COLOR.

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